

On Memorial Day, remembering a man I never knew

By Eve Samples  
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This Memorial Day weekend, I am thinking about a man I never met and a woman I have always known.

The woman is Billie Clark, my grandmother.

In 1940, when she was 14 years old, a man six years her senior struck up a conversation while she was watching fireworks on Independence Day.

She told him she was 15.

"So you'll be 16 on your next birthday?" he asked.

She didn't correct him.

She liked him that much.

"I hope the next time you see me, you will speak to me," Baron Walden Jr. said when they parted that night.

As it turned out, she had plenty of opportunities.

He ran into her at the movies in downtown Corbin, Ky., not far from where Billie's mother (my great-grandmother) ran a tiny grocery store. He walked her home afterwards.

Then he started showing up at the grocery store, too. He would talk to Billie's mother while looking at Billie.

He liked her that much.

When he returned to school at the University of Kentucky, Baron didn't forget her. Nor did she forget him. Even after all these years, she couldn't if she wanted to.

They dated for two summers before he enlisted in the U.S. Army. His first stop was Fort Knox, then he shipped out west for pilot's training with the Army Air Forces.

The summer Billie graduated from high school, she packed a white linen dress that her mother had

made and boarded a train from Corbin to Sacramento.

She and Baron wed on July 10, 1943.

Their marriage would last less than a year.

On June 2, 1944, Lt. Baron Walden's plane went down in the English Channel on its way back from a mission in Germany.

He was piloting an A-20 he had named "Billie the Kid."

Both of his crew members were rescued. When they last saw Baron, he was bailing out, too.

Her husband's body was never recovered, and that fueled my grandmother's hope that he had survived.

She tried to go on with her life on the home front. She took a job at a bank in Corbin, then worked for the telephone company. Few people talked to her about Baron, but it was all she could think about.

"I just wasn't happy," she told me.

When a friend decided to move to Evansville, Ind., to work at an aircraft factory, Billie went, too.

"I had strong, small hands, and they were just right for shell chutes in the wings of airplanes," she explained. She is 85 now, yet it's still easy to imagine her as Rosie the Riveter.

It was there, while she was working at the factory, that the Army confirmed Baron had died.

Billie was a widow at 18.

Though his body was never found, Baron is memorialized at Cambridge American Cemetery in England.

Almost 17 years ago, for the 50th anniversary of D-Day, I had the honor of traveling with my grandmother to England and France. We took a ferry across the English Channel, the same place where Baron went missing a half-century before. Both of us thought about him as we crossed the choppy water.

We walked the beaches of Normandy, the spot where World War II changed course four days after Baron died.

In the 67 years since she lost him, my grandmother has led a full life. She married my grandfather after the war ended and raised four daughters, including my mom.

Still, the years have not erased all of her pain. When she talks about Baron now, a lifetime later, she has to stop occasionally to collect herself. It's a reminder that some scars of war never disappear.

This Memorial Day, I will be thinking about Baron and all the others who never came back.

Eve Samples is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column reflects her opinion.

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